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The Instructional Support Team Initiative

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In the 1980's and 1990's, the use of school-based intervention teams became more prevalent in school divisions across the country. School-based intervention teams that provided some type of pre-referral intervention represented a trend to integrate special education and general education and assist general education teachers that were attempting to meet increasingly diverse student learning needs (Schrag & Henderson, 1996). Interventions provided by these school teams typically addressed a student's academic skill weaknesses and challenging behavior. A hallmark of school-based intervention teams has been their ability to adapt interventions to student's learning styles and classroom situations.

The Instructional Support Team (IST) is one school-based intervention that

has been receiving attention in professional literature not only for its significant staff development component (e.g., modeling for and coaching of classroom teachers on best practices), but also for its effectiveness in reducing special education referrals as well as retentions (Koveleski, Tucker, & Stevens, 1996). The IST model has undergone many refinements over the years as it was instituted in selected school divisions in several states and in all Pennsylvania school districts. Presently, the IST model contains well-delineated case-handling procedures and practices (e.g., student assessment strategies to support teachers and students).

The Instructional Support Team Model is basically designed to provide support to teachers before they refer students to child study

teams. Schools using the IST model hire an individual and provide extensive training to that person in 1) consultation, collaboration and problem-solving skills and 2) curriculum-based assessment strategies. When teachers are concerned about a student, they meet with the Instructional Support Teacher or another case manager from the Instructional Support Team to brainstorm ways to support the student in the classroom. Teachers may then choose to invite their case manager to their classroom for further assistance via modeling, co-teaching, and further collaboration.

To improve student achievement, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) is using a portion of the special education state improvement

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grant monies from the United States Department of Education to launch an IST initiative. Presently, there are three sites that are implementing the IST model. These sites completed an intensive training program conducted during the 1999-2000 school year by two nationally recognized consultants, Ed Gickling and Todd Gravois. Selected staff members from VCU are also involved in supporting this initiative. Plans are also underway to begin developing several other sites in Regions 3 and 8. VCU and the College of William and Mary will support this initiative.

In the subsequent section of this article, staff members at one of the Region 1 IST sites, Byrd Elementary in Goochland County, discuss their participation in the IST initiative. The IST experiences of the other two IST sites (Surry Elementary School and Dinwiddie Elementary School) will be covered in future issues of this newsletter.

THE BYRD ELEMENTARY EXPERIENCE

As Byrd Elementary begins its first year implementing the IST model as a pilot site for the DOE, enthusiasm is mounting. In preparation for the implementation phase, Byrd formed a team, hired an IST teacher, attended trainings, and met with Ed and Todd to develop the IST program. The team even got to observe Ed and Todd in action modeling strategies in the classroom.

The current Instructional Support focus at Byrd Elementary is on training the team in the problem solving process. As requests for assistance and strategy modeling have started to roll in, all members are preparing to take cases. In addition, faculty awareness is increasing so teachers know how to access Instructional Support, how they can benefit from it, and whether the need is individual or class wide.

As an elementary principal, all I can say is "What a breath of fresh air!" I have seen too many teachers in the past use the special education referral system as an "easy out," instead of addressing student problems from an instructional point of view. The IST program provides a middle road for all teachers to follow before referring children to special education. The focus is on regular education, rather than on special education. Use of IST improves classroom instruction and student behavior. At a time when the Virginia Standards of Learning face us all, having a program that improves instruction can only enhance student SOL success and achievement. Most importantly, after the IST program is in place, its maintenance costs are little compared to the huge dividends it will generate. In short, the IST model is a good buy for today and tomorrow.

As the new IST teacher, with 19 years experience in the field of special education, the most attractive piece of Instructional Support for me is the idea of instructional match. In relation to our school in particular, the large numbers of special education classes was something to consider. Helping teachers move individual students from their current levels of functioning to specified goals within the regular education classroom is what good instruction is all about. The data based decision making that is such an integral part of Instructional Support makes the progress real to us all. The immediate action taken on a case once a request for assistance is made, in addition to the onsite support to colleagues, make Instructional Support an appealing process.

The best thing that could have happened at Byrd was having the "Dynamic Duo," Ed and Todd, come to our school. Their training provided a solid foundation for our program. Seeing Ed do Curriculum Based Assessment was invaluable. Having Todd work with us on communication skills was critical. However, this job could not be done without attending the Facilitator Training in Maryland this summer. That piece was essential for me to understand just how to make this whole thing work. I am getting into more and more classrooms and increasing the comfort level of both students and teachers as we work side by side. "Buy in" of the process as a whole seems to be developing slowly but surely. There are lots of questions being asked by faculty and team members as well as myself. As we all know though, "Change is a process, not an event," and we are well on our way!

At-risk: Where Do We Go From Here?

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- • • One of the best models for school-age populations we have seen is the instructional Support Team (IST) model. The IST model is currently being piloted in several sites in Superintendents' Region 1: Byrd Elementary in Goochland, Dinwiddie Elementary, and Surry Elementary. Later this year, several more pilot sites in Superintendents' Regions 8 and 3 will begin working with this model. One of the things we find most useful about the IST model is its simplicity. The IST model does not contain a large number of components that must be juggled at the same time. Both resiliency and collaboration, two important themes for effective programs, are addressed. The IST approach also looks at increasing the success rate of students by providing teachers with additional instructional and behavioral strategies. In the Virginia model of IST, the school creates an IST comprised of a diverse group of school personnel. The current model also includes the addition of a full-time Instructional Support Teacher who provides support and leadership for the team. The entire team receives training and works within the school building to build capacity, by helping teachers to focus on prevention and early intervention rather than remediation. There is more information about the IST model on page 1 of this edition of *Update*. • • •